

Alonso Building  
510-514 E. St. Charles Street  
Brownsville  
Cameron County  
Texas

HABS No. TX-3270

HABS  
TEX,  
31-BROWN

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D. C. 20243

## ALONSO BUILDING

HABS, TEX, 31-BROWN, 2

Location: 510-514 E. St. Charles Street (west corner of intersection of East St. Charles and East 6th Streets), Brownsville, Cameron County, Texas.

USGS West Brownsville Quadrangle, Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 14/649890/2865690.

Present Owner: Dr. Tedd N. Crow, M.D., Box 1072, Brownsville, Texas 78520

Present Occupant: Modern Bride Shop, first floor.  
Private resident, second floor.

Present Use: Commercial and apartment rental property.

Significance: The Alonso Building is an interesting example of a brick, two-story, corner commercial structure in Brownsville. Built around 1890, it still retains its two-story gallery which creates a covered walkway along its street facades. The original owner was Manuel Alonso who sold fine food items from this location.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Dates of Erection: Although no documentation of the date of construction exists, the date 1890 and the name of the store were painted on the cornice of the building. (Theresa Champion.) The earliest Sanborn Map showing the site of the building is 1914, and the building appears on that map.
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: The Alonso Building is located on lots 1, 2, and 3 in Block 32 of the Original Townsite of Brownsville. References to the title of these lots are found in the Cameron County Clerk's office and were traced by Ms. Theresa Champion of the Brownsville Historical Association, as follows:

1877 Warranty Deed dated September 1, 1877, recorded in Supplement E, pages 137-138. Manuel Alonzo (also spelled Alonso) acquired lot 1 from Charles Stillman, S. A. Belden, and Wm. C. Hale.

1877 Agreement and Contract to Convey dated September 1, 1877, recorded in Supplement E, pages 269-271. The executors for the will of Charles Stillman contracted to convey lot 2 to Manuel Alonzo. This contract was released on October 11, 1878, and this release is recorded in Volume F, pages 291-292.

1885 Warranty Deed dated October 20, 1885, recorded in Volume F, pages 777-778. Manuel Alonzo acquired lot 3 from J. M. and Petra Main who had received it from Thomas Carson, agent for the Stillman interests.

Beginning in 1925 various people acquired interest in the combined lots and the title is complicated because of the multiple ownership. Between 1939 and 1944 Maria G. de Barreda consolidated her interest in the property.

1962 Warranty Deed dated October 11, 1962, and recorded in Volume 734 beginning on page 477. Maria G. de Barreda sold all of lots 1, 2, and 3 to Fausto F. Sabrino.

1970 Contract for Sale dated February 27, 1970, and recorded in Volume 886 beginning on page 735. Fausto F. and Verna M. Sabrino contracted to sell lots 1, 2, and 3 to Jaime and Elda Martinez and Antonio Weaver.

1975 Warranty Deed with Assumption and Vendor's Lend dated October 29, 1975, recorded in Volume 1036 beginning on page 380. Antonio Weaver, Jaime Martinez and Elda Martinez sold lots 1, 2, and 3 to Tedd Crow, the present owner.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Probably Manuel Alonso, whose grandson, Mime Trevino, stated that Alonso ordered the iron work on the second-floor balcony from New Orleans.
5. Original plan and construction of the building: The earliest plan of the site which has been found appears on the 1914 San-born Map of Brownsville. This plan shows a brick general store, which is the Alonso Building, along St. Charles Street on the northeast boundary of the property. A one-story brick building with a porch is located to the southwest of the store. This building faces East 6th Street. Two warehouse buildings are located on the western section of the property.

Two outbuildings are also shown on this map. The first is a small, square one-story brick structure, located between the store and the dwelling. This was probably the gazebo covering the cistern recalled by Theresa Champion. A second rectangular outbuilding is located in the western corner of the property. This structure is one-story with a slate or tin roof and is divided into three equal parts. It appears to be attached at its long side to a one-and-one-half-story structure on the adjoining property. A 12-foot brick wall runs along the alley at the southwest boundary of the property.

The Alonso Building is shown in some detail. The northwestern 3/5 of the building has a 15' high wall along St. Charles Street (northeast wall) and a 12' wall on the northwest. It appears to be one story. Three windows are shown on the southwest wall. An 8" wall with one opening separates this section from the rest of the store. The remaining 2/5 of the building is shown as two-story (walls 30' high). It is divided into two equal sections by an interior wall running parallel to the southeastern wall.

6. Additions and alterations: Information on additions and alterations was not exhaustively researched. Several oral sources have indicated that the unusual appearance of the gallery (with its first-floor supports constructed of wood, and second-floor supports and railings of cast and wrought iron) dates back to the 1920s at least. These sources all believe that the present gallery is original to the house. Both the 1914 Sanborn Map and physical evidence indicates that a covered walkway extended the full length of the building along its northeast facade on St. Charles Street.

According to Mimé Treviño, grandson of the original owner, a second-floor dining room was added in the early 1920s. Evidence for this addition on the northwestern portion of the second floor can be seen on the exterior of the building. The addition is not reflected in the proportions shown on the 1914 map.

In the 1960s the two-story portion of the building was painted pink and the ironwork painted pale green. It had formerly been painted green with black ironwork. Around 1970 a skylight was installed in the rear of the building to accommodate the needs of an art studio.

B. Historical Events and Persons Associated with the Building:

1. Manuel Alonso, the original owner of the store, was a Spaniard. According to his grandson, Mimé Treviño, Alonso came to Brownsville in 1865 and died in 1922. Mr. A. A. Champion, a local historian who specializes in the documentary history of Brownsville during the nineteenth century, has been unable to locate much information on Alonso. W. H. Chatfield noted that Manuel A. Alonso owned property in Brownsville assessed at \$12,070 in 1802. (Chatfield, p. 25.)
2. The store operated by Manuel Alonso was known as Los Dos Cañones (The Two Canons). The date 1890 along with canons was painted on the cornice of the building. (Theresa Champion.) After Manuel Alonso's death in 1922 the building was occupied by one of his sons. From around 1925 to 1940 J. A. Champion (father of Theresa Champion and brother of A. A. Champion) rented the building. Here Champion sold "fancy groceries" as had Alonso before him.

It is interesting to note that there was enough wealth in the Brownsville/Matamoros area to support what was essentially a very sizeable gourmet food distribution center for the fine produce of the rich citrus orchards and vegetable farms of the Rio Grande Valley.

3. In the early 1970s the building held an art gallery, framing shop, and studio space. Currently it is occupied by the Modern Bride Shop, which sells wedding gowns, gifts, and other accessories.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Interview with Mr. A. A. Champion, 642 West Levee Street, Brownsville, Texas, on August 11, 1977. Mr. Champion's brother occupied the building from ca. 1925 to 1940. Mr. Champion furnished general information about the building and its occupants.

Interview with Miss Theresa Champion, Brownsville, Texas, on August 9, 1977. Miss Champion's father occupied the building from ca. 1925 to 1940. Miss Champion furnished information on the building as she remembered it. She also did research on the title of the building for the Brownsville Historical Association.

Interviews with Mr. Mimé Treviño, 1727 Palm Blvd., Brownsville, Texas, on August 8, 1977. Mr. Treviño is the grandson of Manuel Alonso. Mr. Treviño provided general information about the buildings on the site and about the family.

Brownsville Historical Society Files in the City Planning Office, Box 911, Brownsville, Texas.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Chatfield, W. H., The Twin Cities of the Border. Originally published in 1893. Reprinted in 1959 by the Harbert Davenport Memorial Fund, the Brownsville Historical Association, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley Historical Society.

WPA Writers Project, Texas: A Guide to the Lone Star State. American Guide Series. New York: Hastings House. 1947.

Prepared by: Betty Bird  
University of Virginia  
Project Historian  
1977

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural interest and merit: This is an example of a disappearing building type, housing a business on the first floor with living quarters above, that was once common to the area.
2. Condition of fabric: Fair.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The rectangular two-story portion of the building is approximately eighty-five feet by thirty feet with a one-story addition approximately seventy-five feet by thirty feet. The two-story building has a seven-bay first-floor front, and an eight-bay second-floor front. The one-story addition has a six-bay front.
2. Foundation: Brick.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Brick, common bond, some painted, with brick cornice and brick pilasters on the ends make up the walls. Each pilaster has a brick capital. A molded brick water table forms a pedestal. There is a brick pediment in the center of the northeast wall. The brick parapet is capped by a two-course projecting brick cap. The cornice has corbeled brickwork, with returns on the ends.
4. Structural system, framing: This consists of brick load-bearing walls and wood frame floor and ceiling construction.
5. Porches, stoops, bulkheads, etc.: There is a covered walk extending around the two street facades on the first floor with a covered balcony on the second floor. The floor of the balcony is supported by eight simple wood columns, and its pent roof, with hipped ends, above the second floor, is supported by cast-iron columns. The cast-iron columns have a solid, decorated pedestal with open grillwork above, which is set diagonally across the pedestal. There is a cast-iron decorative bracket on each side of the iron columns. A cast-iron grillwork railing extends between the columns around the second-floor balcony. The balcony floor is wood and the ceiling is exposed structure. There are two brick steps at the center door on the northeast facade, with a decorative iron railing on each side.

An exterior stairway leads to the second floor on the southwest side. The open-string wood stair has a landing one-third the way up, and extends to a landing at the second floor, supported by wood columns. The simple wood handrail has turned balusters and extends to the top landing and around it.

6. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The principal entrance to the two-story building at the first floor is in the center. The wood-panel double door has molded panels on the interior and vertical wood paneling on the exterior. There is a wooden surround and wood sill. There is a two-light sash transom with vertical iron bars on the exterior beneath the flat brick arch.

On the first floor there are four sets of double-hinged, folding-leaf doors on the northeast facade and one set on the southeast facade. On the second floor there are six sets on northeast and two sets on southeast facades. These doors have a molded wood panel in the lower section, and a removable two-light sash in the top, with wood surrounds, wood thresholds, and a two-light transom with vertical iron bars across the exterior. The doors on the second floor also have a screen door, and a pair of adjustable-louvre wood shutters.

The doorway on the southeast facade, south corner, leads into the stairhall. This door has double-hinged, folding-leaf panels with a molded-wood lower panel and an upper panel with a round-arched top. There is a wood surround, wood sill, wood threshold, and a two-light transom with vertical iron bars.

Doorways on the first-floor addition across the northeast facade have double, wood-panel doors with a three-light top panel. Some of the doors have the glass boarded up. There is a two-light glass transom, wood sill, and wood surrounds.

Several doorways on the southwest have double, wood-panel doors with diagonal wood on the interior and vertical wood on the exterior. These doorways have wood surrounds and sills. Some of these doors have been closed up. There is a sliding wood freight door on the northeast, with metal track, now closed up, and a window cut into it.

- b. Windows and shutters: Wooden windows on the second floor have six-over-six, and one-over-one, double-hung sashes, with wood surrounds and sills. There is a flat brick arch, and some windows have wood-louvre shutters. There are large fixed glass display windows with wood surrounds on the first floor of the northeast facade.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The flat roof, with slight slope, has an asphalt built-up covering.

- b. Cornice, eaves: There is a brick parapet on three sides and an open cornice on the rear. There is a metal gutter and downspouts. There are two skylights on the one-story portion with gabled roof. Skylights have wire-glass panels.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. First floor: The first floor has an entrance on the south corner at the southeast facade that leads into the stair hall. Entrances on the northeast facade lead into the commercial spaces. The commercial space on the southeast and is composed of two large spaces with a large brick arched opening connecting them. At the northwest end of the space are two dressing rooms. In the northwest wall of the dressing room a large opening has been blocked up. At the rear of the commercial space is a small work room and storage space. A small brick arched opening connects these two. There is a small toilet. The northwest portion of the building is divided into two spaces, each of which has a centered skylight. The skylight is set on the diagonal axis and is supported on each end, in the center, by a wood column with angular braces to the edges. The walls around the opening have diagonal wood siding.
  - b. Second floor: The stairway leads into an apartment that is two rooms wide. On the southeast and northeast are openings to the balcony. A similar apartment is on the northwest end with entrance by an exterior stairway.
2. Stairways: The wood stairway has two winders at the first floor, and extends in a straight-run open string to the second floor. The balustrade extends from a newel on the first floor to the second floor, curves and continues around the open wall, curving again, and ending at the wall. The simple wood handrail is supported by two turned balusters at each tread.
3. Flooring: In the first story there is wood flooring, some covered with carpet. The second story also has wood flooring, some covered with lineoleum.
4. Walls and ceiling finish: Walls on the first floor are brick and wood boards. Ceilings are exposed wood joists with a bead each side, and wood boards. There is a corbeled brick at the ceiling in each space that was formerly a fireplace. Some rooms have beaded wood-panel ceilings.

Second-floor walls are plaster, painted, and ceilings are wood boards. There is a vertical wood wainscot along the stairway and in the rooms. Ceilings are approximately twelve feet in height.



5. Doorways and doors: Doorways are wooden and double doors on the first floor are of flush vertical wood boards. Second-floor doors are of wood paneling.
6. Special decorative features, trim, and cabinet work: The brick arch between rooms on the first floor has a brick projection at the springing line. The large opening on the northwest wall has a wide wood trim with a deep head trim that extends beyond each jamb.
7. Mechanical equipment:
  - a. Heating: Space heaters are used for heating.
  - b. Electrical: There is modern electrical lighting, and some ceiling fans. Sales room of store has chandelier of glass and wrought iron, painted a light color.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The Alonso Building sits in a residential area, its long axis facing northeast from the corner of E. Sixth and E. St. Charles streets. There is a brick wall extending around the northwest and southwest sides of the property and partly along the southeast side. A brick-paved patio extends on the southwest side of the building, with large trees and planting. A brick wall divides the patio into two parts.

To the southwest of the building, across the alley, there is a brick house facing Sixth Street. The brick walls are plastered and painted pale gold. This one-floor-and-basement residence has a flat roof and a porch around two sides. The house has been altered somewhat, but is in good condition. There are wood shutters at windows.

Southwest of this house there is still another small brick residence. It has a wood shingle front, shed roof and porch across the front supported by three and one-half columns with a brace at each side.

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1977

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

At the suggestion of a national preservation consultant, Ellen Beasley, this project was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, in cooperation with the Brownsville Historical Association and the Brownsville City Planning Department. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief of HABS, the project was completed during the summer of 1977 at the Historic American Buildings Survey field office, Brownsville, Texas, by John P. White (Associate Professor, Texas Technological University) Project Supervisor; Betty Bird (University of Virginia) Project Historian; and Student Assistant Architects Scott Deneroff (University of Maryland), Susan Dornbusch (University of Virginia), Matthew Lowry (University of Pennsylvania), Eduardo Luaces (University of Florida), and Alan Willig (the City College of the City University of New York). Special assistance and support were provided to the HABS team by Mrs. Mary Simmons, Mrs. Sally Fleming, Miss Theresa Champion, and Mr. Calvin Walker of the Brownsville Historical Association; and by Mr. Mario Moreno, Mr. Richard Waldman, Mrs. Graciela Salinas, and Mr. Larry Brown of the Brownsville City Planning Department. Archival photographs of the project were made in February 1979 by Bill Engdahl, of Hedrich-Blessing, Chicago, Illinois. Editing and final preparation of the documentation was carried out in the HABS Washington office by Lucy Pope Wheeler of the HABS professional staff.